



The other day, while driving back from Shimoga I got into a bit of an argument with a close friend of mine. Traversing into philosophy, we were debating whether there is anything called 'gray' in life. It all began when I took serious objection to his words 'there is nothing called gray in my life, I always live in black and white!' He further went to the extent of saying: "I will never teach my children that there is something called gray."

I hope you are with me when I use the word 'gray'. Here, gray on P129 refers to the various situations/relationships/attitudes/actions which are outside our normally stated fence of values. For example, while in public nobody accepts that bribery is good, it still thrives! How do you resolve this paradox? The 'Swalpa adjust madi..' (please adjust a bit) attitude is yet another example. Call it situational or circumstantial - the gray in us does appear every now and then - whether we admit it or not. It is a difficult admission to make - I agree; it takes courage.

It took me by absolute surprise that there live individuals in this world who completely ignore or believe that their actions/thoughts/interactions with the world are totally bereft of any gray. Driving the next 200 kms in mental cacophony, the disbelief continued to haunt me. After many weeks, there finally came a 'eureka' moment! Could the actual discord between my friend and I have been the fact that he used a 'science lens' to view the world while mine was steeped in a background of social science? Don't you feel that the sciences are far more definite, precise, right-wrong, demanding a certain degree of absoluteness, proof and closure? While on the other hand, the social sciences to my mind are more flexible, accommodating, and willing to accept different points of view. I feel this stems from an innate belief that there are no absolute rights/wrongs. It has more to do with the lens you view them with.

I Started Gathering Proof for My Latest Hypothesis

And believe me; the more I think about it, the more convinced I am that people from a background of social science view the world with a lens that's hopelessly inclusive and least exclusive.

It is this lens that I wish to write about and how the subject

impacted learning through my formative years of study.

Being a keen follower of politics in the country, my earliest recollection of a horrible debate was the Babri Masjid incident. Thanks to the local riots that followed, schools were closed and I had ample time to watch those painful visuals of people on top of the mosque trying to demolish the very ground that they were standing upon. Very impressionable - but a feisty little girl that I was - my instant reaction was to take sides. I kept asking my helpless parents very difficult questions. Why are some people saying they are right when they are actually bringing down buildings? Why aren't the police arresting them? Naïve, yet extremely curious and eager to make sense of the event, this chaos did not settle for a long time. It got carried on to school and my social science teacher. And she did such a tremendous job of putting things in perspective!

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She began by drawing a circle in the center of the black board. She told me the circle represented the world. She asked me to fill in all the things that I felt were part of the world. Just as a little kid would, I filled in water, land, mountains, people, my family, my dog, and other things. I distinctly remember writing India in it. And then she drew a stick figure to the left of the circle and called it 'Nidhi'. She drew another stick figure on the right and called it by some other name. She filled the world with a few other things that she felt the other person might want in them. She then showed me that I was seeing one part of the world and called it 'my world', while this other person was

seeing another part of the world and so we were seeing two different dimensions of the same world. This, she said, was the problem. People were seeing two different realities in the same building (mosque and temple) and that's why they wanted to bring it down. Another 'eureka' moment – for the first time, I realized that the same event/action can have two very different thought processes behind the supposed rationale.

It felt extremely unnerving to me at that time, that there could be two groups of people believing in their own set of truths! As an adult, this has become so much more apparent and important – to realize that people operate from different contexts.

I was recently on an outdoor leadership course in the US and one incident transported me back in time. There I was, with a bunch of American youngsters, roughing it out in the wilderness for 60 days! The social dynamics of the team was challenging, to say the least. At one point, folks were even upset about my mannerisms and vocabulary – I did not say 'please' and 'thank you' at the drop of a hat, my expression of respect was less outwardly. And, can you believe it: this was discussed for over 2 hours in our evening meeting! Aha...different contexts again! Was I under critique thanks to my different cultural upbringing? Do we, as Indians, express ourselves as much in words? Do we communicate differently? Is it right on my part to judge anybody for their observations when I realize that my whole team was operating from a different cultural context? Social science to my rescue – and there I was completely at peace with my team mates, having realized that there was actually a cultural gap, there was nothing personal or malicious in their observations. Yet another example of how my learning from the subject enabled me to be absolutely objective about what could well have been a delicate situation.

Talking about objectivity and different points of view, one vivid memory from school stands out; often the civics class used to be characterized by highly polemic positions by students – especially when it came to parliamentary democracy. Difficult questions about corruption, the elections, horse-trading, etc. were thrown in. But our teacher navigated through all of them beautifully. In hindsight, I realize that she gave us no answers but left the discussion open-ended. Often, we would chide her saying 'she ought to take a stand'. Isn't that what we were taught? Taking a stand almost seemed

central to survival in school - and life, I would say. As a child, often between friends one was asked 'tell me, whose friend are you, ours or theirs?' The answer would dictate one's social circle. My Math teacher's words about getting it 'right' or 'wrong' always hounded my limited imagination. I often wondered as a child, why can't there be two right answers? Why was the world always steeped in certainty? It was always either 'this' or 'that'.

Perhaps this is why I enjoyed my social studies class the most – here, I was allowed to make sense of two different and conflicting viewpoints without having to defend one or the other. There was no proof to completely negate my take on things. For example, in history, I always wondered what the common man was doing when these kings fought wars and expanded their territory. I spent much time wondering if every second citizen was a soldier in olden times. Were there ordinary people like us those days – or did you have to be a noble, craftsmen, soldier or Brahmin? Did people only fight wars or did they also get a chance to lead a peaceful life? Why is there so little heard about the 'dark' side of kings? Often, these were left to my imagination with very few pointers from my teacher. The beauty was that the teacher was open to my learning new things and changing course accordingly. I was not ridiculed for 'one right' or 'one wrong'. This diversity of rights and wrongs was extremely encouraging.

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Over time, the need to justify your stand/or your concept of 'right' and 'wrong' grew less. As years went by, and I started engaging with difficult questions like building dams, eradicating forests, shooting wildlife, relocating local people and tampering with conservation, my social science learning helped; it enabled me to appreciate different viewpoints and respect them. I was not compelled to stick to one

dogma and live by the same. The joy of navigating, making mistakes, seeing different aspects of life, assessing different viewpoints and learning the art of reconciliation, negotiation and problem-solving have been my biggest takeaways from the subject.

While I vouch that the subject has played a central role in

the way I relate to the world around me, it has informed my choices, interactions, relationships to keep alive within me a sense of self, humanity and choice. Often, it has demanded that I step out of my comfort zone; learn that people operate from different contexts and that my lens cannot be used to judge them since they have their own lens for the world. It has been an insightful journey indeed.

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